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MRS. BEHN'S *OROONOKO*

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Historians of the novel assign to Mrs. Behn's *Oroonoko* a place of distinct importance in the development of realism. They concede that those parts of the narrative which recount the adventures of Oroonoko in Coramantien are full of romance, but maintain that his subsequent slavery in Surinam, his reunion with his bride Imoinda, his insurrection, and his violent death, are on the whole delineated with fidelity to fact. "Imagination," says Professor Canby, "colored the heroic life of the slave as well as the romantic intrigue of the negro prince," but only, it seems, in a few negligible respects; the rest is considered "truthful, touching, and vivid."[1] If we ask why Mrs. Behn writes romantically about Coramantien, and realistically about Surinam, we are reminded that she had visited the latter country but not the former. "The localities considered in the second part of the story," explains Professor Siegel in his monograph on Mrs. Behn, "she knows from her own observation; in the events she has to some extent participated; her description is consequently far more credible and probable than in the first part."[2] And Mr. E. A. Baker, editor of Mrs. Behn's stories, concludes: "It was the truth and power with which she recounted what she herself had witnessed in Surinam that has singled out for permanence the best of her novels."[3]

If, remembering these opinions, we read *Oroonoko* itself, we come now and then upon incidents that surprise us. Mrs. Behn tells us of a monstrous tiger which had long infested Surinam, and had been repeatedly shot quite through the body, but without effect until the mighty hunter Oroonoko slew it; and "when the heart of this courageous animal was taken out, there were seven bullets of lead in it, the wound seamed up with great scars, and she lived with the bullets a great while, for it was long since they were shot."[4] Elsewhere she writes: "Sometimes we [four women and two men] would go surprising, and in search of young tigers in their dens, watching when the old ones went forth to forage for prey; and oftentimes we have been in great danger, and have fled apace for our lives, when surprised by the dams."[5] Those who know anything of the dreaded jaguar of South America can hardly believe that such visits of a pleasant afternoon were ever regarded by the colonists as suitable diversions for ladies and gentlemen.

[1] H. S. Canby, *The Short Story in English*, New York, 1909, pp. 164, 167.
[2] P. Siegel, *Aphra Behns Gedichte und Prosawerke; Anglia*, XXV, 352.
[3] *The Novels of Mrs. Aphra Behn*, ed. E. A. Baker, London, 1905, p. xxiii.
[4] *Oroonoko*, ed. E. A. Baker, p. 55. [5] *Oroonoko*, p. 52.

Mrs. Behn's sensational description of her hero's attempted suicide likewise gives us pause. We are told that Oroonoko, after remaining beside the dead body of Imoinda, in agony of spirit and without food, for eight days, roused himself on the approach of his pursuers, defiantly "cut a piece of flesh from his own throat and threw it at them," "ripped up his own belly, and took his bowels and pulled them out," and still had strength enough to drive his knife into the heart of an onrushing opponent. Yet Oroonoko did not die. His captors carried him a long distance to the plantation, "laid him on a couch, and had the chirurgeon immediately to him, who dressed his wounds, and sewed up his belly, and used means to bring him to life, which they effected." "In six or seven days he recovered his senses; for you must know that wounds are almost to a miracle cured in the Indies, unless wounds in the legs, which they rarely ever cure."[1] In such instances we may surely suspect that Mrs. Behn is more desirous of magnifying the strength and bravery of her hero than of narrating experiences veraciously. The exaggeration or improbability we see in them is, however, insufficient to destroy, though it may impair, her reputation as a realist. In fact, incredible as seems the recovery of Oroonoko from such frightful wounds, we cannot disprove its possibility. Though similar cases are rare, medical literature records a sufficient number to compel reluctant belief.[2] At any rate, the dubious episodes which I have pointed out do not seem to have disconcerted the admirers of Mrs. Behn, and were presumably dismissed from their minds as inconsiderable deviations from the truth. They remark upon the significance of her calling *Oroonoko*, not a novel or tale, but a "history," and of her opening it with these words:

> I do not pretend, in giving you the history of this royal slave, to entertain my reader with the adventures of a feigned hero, whose life and fortunes fancy may manage at the poet's pleasure; nor, in relating the truth, design to adorn it with any accidents, but such as arrived in earnest to him: and it shall come simply into the world, recommended by its own proper merits and natural intrigues; there being enough of reality to support it, and to render it diverting, without the addition of invention. I was myself an eye-witness to a great part of what you will find here set down; and what I could not be witness of, I received from the mouth of the chief actor in this history, the hero himself.[3]

This statement of her intention is generally accepted as sincere. Oroonoko's history, says Professor Canby, "I can only believe after many readings, she wished to set forth with a reasonable degree of truth." The resulting vividness of her story he graphically describes as follows:

> The recital of Oroonoko's slavery is too circumstantial to be suspected, before Defoe, of being fictitious. His fortitude, his high spirit, the revolt which he inspired, the brutal tortures he suffered, his fidelity to Imoinda, whom he finds a fellow slave, all bear the print of

[1] *Oroonoko*, pp. 78–79.

[2] I am indebted for this comment on Oroonoko's cure to Roger Irving Lee, M. D., of Boston.

[3] *Oroonoko*, p. 1.

truth as well as the increase of a romantic fancy. His death is told not only with Flaubertian realism but with the passion of one seeking to expose unjust officials who had been cruel to a friend. Furthermore, it is a real South America, with gorgeous vegetation, Indian villages most anthropologically described, armadilloes, and even electric eels, with a "quality so cold" that the catcher's arm is benumbed. I have seen many early "voyages" to the "other world," as Aphra always calls it, whose descriptions are less specific than the setting of this story.[1]

The historical bearing of the realistic purpose and character of *Oroonoko* has not been overlooked. Our attention is called to the fact that when the work appeared, in 1688, romance was the predominant form of fiction. "Of the highest importance for the substance of narrative literature," says Professor Siegel, "is the appearance of Mrs. Behn; for the first time after a long interval, actuality is again emphasized."[2] "For making use of incidents of real life in the service of fiction at a time when the heroic romance was at the height of its vogue," says Professor Raleigh, "she deserves all credit."[3] These remarks indicate that if there is an error in the commonly accepted doctrine, it affects not merely our understanding of *Oroonoko*, but complicates one of the most puzzling and important problems of modern English scholarship — namely, the true origin of the realistic novel.

The nature of the foundation on which the prevailing doctrine rests may be revealed by asking some pertinent questions. Were the political and social conditions of Surinam, at the time when these events are supposed to have occurred, such as to render them possible? Can Mrs. Behn's descriptions of the countryside, the climate, the colonists, the slaves, and the natives, be shown to correspond to reality? Surely, until we have satisfactory answers on such points, we do not know the real character of the story. Yet, astonishing as it may seem, these questions, so far from having been answered, have hardly been raised. Mrs. Behn's assurance that she is faithfully recording fact is, as to the principal part of her story, passively accepted even though she is known to be romancing in other parts. Because the narrative is vivid, it is believed true. The fact that an imaginary experience may be as vividly told as an actual one, is ignored. In other words, what in this case passes as literary history rests on the author's assertion and on impressions produced by her artistic power.

Possibly the reason why no real effort has been made to discover whether *Oroonoko* is based upon actual observation may lie in the fact that there are unusual obstacles to such an inquiry. To determine what the appearance and condition of a small tropical colony really were two hundred and fifty years ago, is in no case easy; and respecting Surinam the ordinary difficulties are magnified. In 1667 it was surrendered by the English to the Dutch; and consequently the English historians neglect the colony because it did not

[1] Canby, pp. 164, 165. [2] Siegel, p. 379.
[3] Walter Raleigh, *The English Novel*, 5th ed., New York, 1906, p. 107.

remain British, while the Dutch say little or nothing concerning its history before the time of their possession. Nevertheless, oblivion has not wholly obscured the character of the environment in which Oroonoko dwelt.

Though Mrs. Behn does not mention the date of Oroonoko's sojourn in Surinam, she chances to provide us with information that enables us to calculate it. "Immediately after his time," she says, the Dutch took the colony[1] — an event which occurred in March, 1667. Furthermore, she tells us that Oroonoko, because of the outrageous injustice of his enslavement, was promised his liberty as soon as the Lord Governor of Surinam, "who was every day expected," should revisit the colony.[2] The Lord Governor referred to must have been Francis Lord Willoughby of Parham, a distinguished administrator of several British dependencies in the West Indies, whose headquarters were in Barbadoes. He came to Surinam rarely, his last visit extending from about November, 1664, to May, 1665.[3] In July, 1666, he was lost at sea. These data serve to place the action of *Oroonoko* in the latter part of 1665 and the earlier part of 1666. It may be added that several allusions, in the course of the story, to the lapse of time make it evident that between the arrival of Oroonoko and his death a period of not much less than seven months, and hardly more than nine, must have passed.[4] Since all these chronological particulars agree with one another, the problem whether Mrs. Behn's narrative is true reduces itself to the question, Does her account of Surinam correspond with its actual state in 1665 and 1666?

Mrs. Behn's allusions to historical personages and political conditions prove in some respects quite correct. She calls the Deputy Governor, Byam; and William Byam was, as a matter of fact, "Lieutenant General of Guiana and Governor of Willoughby Land" from about 1662 to 1667.[5] The only other official whom she names is one Banister, according to her account a member of the Governor's Council.[6] The colonial state papers do not contain a list of the councilors, but it is not unlikely that Banister was one of them; for after Byam's departure in 1667 "Sergeant Major James Banister, the only remaining eminent person," became lieutenant governor.[7] It is noteworthy that the wars with the Dutch made each of these men known in England. It was Byam who headed the forces that vainly defended Surinam against the Dutch admiral Crynsens in 1667; and it was Banister who, in 1668, made the final surrender of the colony. The latter again became prominent when, in arranging the transportation of the English settlers from Surinam, he quarreled with the Dutch and was imprisoned by them; and in the British declaration of war in 1672 his imprisonment was stated as a *casus belli*. That

[1] *Oroonoko*, p. 42. [2] Ibid., pp. 47, 50.
[3] *Calendar of State Papers, Colonial Series, America and West Indies, 1661–1668;* London, 1880, pp. 249, 297–298. [4] *Oroonoko*, pp. 40, 42–44, 47, 57, 62, 67, 74, 76, 78–79.
[5] *State Papers*, pp. 104, 108, 449. [6] *Oroonoko*, p. 80. [7] *State Papers*, p. 599.

Mrs. Behn correctly names these officials is therefore but slender evidence of intimate familiarity with the local affairs of Surinam.

Mrs. Behn's statement that when Oroonoko, seeking freedom, put himself at the head of three hundred negroes, many of the leading colonists pitied him so much that they would not pursue him, is questionable. It seems strange that in a slave-owning community they should have failed to realize that mere self-preservation demanded the crushing of so formidable an insurrection. Another dubious passage is that describing the militia which, under Byam's leadership, set out after Oroonoko:

> Never did one see so comical an army march forth to war. . . . Most of their arms were of those sort of cruel whips they call cat with nine tails; some had rusty useless guns for show; others old basket-hilts, whose blades had never seen the light in this age; and others had long staffs and clubs.[1]

Shall we believe that Byam, who at this very time had sufficient military forces to carry the war against the Dutch and the French into the enemy's territories, and to capture posts from each of them,[2] commanded so ill-armed a rabble?

Likewise difficult to bring into accord with the historical situation is Mrs. Behn's scornful characterization of the Council:

> . . . who (not to disgrace them or burlesque the government there) consisted of such notorious villains as Newgate never transported; and, possibly, originally were such who understood neither the laws of God or man, and had no sort of principles to make them worthy the name of men; but at the very council table would contradict and fight with one another, and swear so bloodily, that it was terrible to hear and see them.[3]

If such was the real character of the government, we should expect to find that the British colonial office, whose correspondence of this period contains many complaints of maladministration in other dependencies, would have been frequently appealed to by the settlers in Surinam; but the only evidence of that kind appears in a letter of 1662, which charges Byam with an act of oppression — a charge which was apparently dismissed.[4] A year later one Renatus Enys writes from Surinam to the Secretary: "The colony is in good order, being nobly upheld by the power and prudence of those at the helm."[5] It seems unlikely that men as vicious and unrestrained as those described by Mrs. Behn could have guided Surinam, through all the difficulties of a new settlement in an unwholesome region, to that strength and prosperity which it had attained by 1666.

Our suspicions are increased by Mrs. Behn's parting shot at the Council: "Some of them were afterwards hanged, when the Dutch took possession of the place; others sent off in chains."[6] Whereas the other accusations are

[1] *Oroonoko*, pp. 66–67.
[2] James Rodway, *Guiana: British, Dutch, and French;* London, 1912, p. 63.
[3] *Oroonoko*, pp. 72–73. [4] *State Papers*, pp. 104, 108. [5] Ibid., pp. 166–167.
[6] *Oroonoko*, p. 73.

merely difficult to reconcile with our conception of the general state of affairs; the last one directly conflicts with known historical facts. Under the treaty of surrender, it was explicitly stipulated that the lives and property of every settler should be spared by the Dutch, and that the British should freely depart from Surinam with their possessions. When Major Banister, because of petty interferences with these rights, protested and was imprisoned, Great Britain raised protests which led to a renewal of the war. Had the Dutch treated members of the Council in the violent way alleged by Mrs. Behn, it would certainly have transpired in the diplomatic correspondence which the actual situation developed. In short, we find in the historical background of *Oroonoko* several improbabilities and one misstatement.

Of the climate of Surinam the characteristics that strike the European visitor are intense heat and great moisture. One effect of the latter is noted by Mrs. Behn in her derisive description of the rusty arms of the militia; but otherwise she seems, for a supposed realist, peculiarly insensible to the true nature of the climate. Though, according to her story, she must have been in the land not less than seven months, she never mentions the rainy seasons. She casually remarks that "the rays [of the sun] are very fierce here"; but the costumes which she and her friends wore on an eight-day river journey, and which excited the amazement of the Indians, may cause us wonder too. "We were dressed," she declares, "so as is most commode for the hot countries, very glittering and rich, so that we appeared extremely fine; my own hair was cut short, and I had a taffety cap with black feathers on my head; my brother was in a stuff suit, with silver loops and buttons, and an abundance of green ribbon."[1] The atmosphere in which her story is immersed is best expressed in her ardent words: "It is there eternal spring, always the very months of April, May, and June."[2] We are reminded thereby of "the sweet ayre" praised by Raleigh and his immediate followers in those rose-colored passages describing their explorations upon the Orinoco, wherein they mingle enthusiasm and inaccuracy.[3]

Some of the geographical allusions in *Oroonoko* are startling. Surinam, we are told, "reaches from east to west, one way as far as China, and another to Peru,"[4] — which suggests the geography of the sixteenth century rather than that of the seventeenth. Again, we are informed that the Governor commanded a guard to be set at the mouth of the Amazon to prohibit people ascending it — a wild scheme which is conceivable only if we accept Mrs. Behn's statement that the Amazon is "almost as broad as the river of Thames."[5] Yet, as the Amazon is over four hundred miles from Surinam,

[1] *Oroonoko*, pp. 57–58. [2] Ibid., p. 51.

[3] For example, *Newes of Sr. Walter Rauleigh* (1618), in Peter Force's *Tracts*, Washington, III (1844), 23, and especially pp. 27–28. Cf. Harcourt's description of the lovely land Cooshebery, in *Purchas His Pilgrimes*, Glasgow, XVI (1906), 369.

[4] *Oroonoko*, p. 50. [5] Ibid., p. 62.

and as the interior regions of Guiana were still unexplored, we may perhaps consider such slips possible even in a visitor to the colony.

The immediate topography of the colony itself, however, we should expect to find fairly distinct and true. Mrs. Behn narrates several journeys on the Surinam, but seems to think the riverside occupied only by plantations. In silence she passes by outstanding features of its shores — the fort, the settlement of Jews, and the town of Tararica, with its hundred houses and a chapel.[1] She tells us that the colonists went aboard the slave ship bearing Oroonoko, at the mouth of the river.[2] This is possible; but it seems to have been customary for ships to proceed some fifty miles up the river to the good anchorage before Tararica, naturally the local center of the slave traffic. She implies that one of the plantations was near the mouth of the river;[3] but we know that the lowest was some thirty-five miles upstream. Indeed, it was because the fort (about fifteen miles from the mouth of the Surinam) was so distant from the settled region that Byam was handicapped in trying to hold it against the Dutch.[4] Ignoring apparently the site of the fort, Mrs. Behn says that Oroonoko proposed to lead his fellow slaves towards the sea, a plan that seems hardly in accord with his oft-praised intelligence. When negroes ran away in Surinam, they made for the interior, where their descendants, the "bush negroes," live to this day.

A striking landmark in the country, as she depicts it, is the site of Mrs. Behn's residence:

> As soon as I came into the country, the best house in it was presented me, called St. John's Hill. It stood on a vast rock of white marble, at the foot of which the river ran a vast depth down, and not to be descended on that side; the little waves, still dashing and washing the foot of this rock, made the softest murmurs and purlings in the world.[5]

As any one may observe who compares the geological chart of the Surinam basin in Karl Martin's *Niederländisch West Indien* with the map thereof in Hartsinck's *Beschryving van Guiana*, "vast rocks of white marble" have no place in this flat alluvial plain. The nearest approach to such an eminence is the "Parnassus of blauwe Berg," a hundred meters high. But this is composed of dark-colored diabase; and it is ten miles above Marshall's Creek, then the limit of the plantations. When Raleigh penetrated into the interior of what is now British Guiana, he saw afar off "a mountain of chrystal [really of sandstone] like a white church tower of an exceeding height," and other explorers in those parts reported many hills;[6] but none resembling Mrs. Behn's

[1] Jan Jacob Hartsinck, *Beschryving van Guiana*, 1770, II, 567–574; James Rodway, *Guiana*, 1912, pp. 51–53, 61–62. Some discrepancies between these two descriptions do not affect my argument. [2] *Oroonoko*, p. 38.

[3] Cf. the three-day trip mentioned in *Oroonoko*, p. 40, with the corresponding distance noted on p. 80. [4] Rodway, p. 64. [5] *Oroonoko*, pp. 51–52.

[6] Raleigh, Sir Walter, *The Discovery of Guiana*, ed. Schomburgk, 1848, p. 101 and note; *Purchas His Pilgrimes*, XVI, 367, 370, 408.

description rose in the inhabited district of Surinam. On the other hand, we miss an interesting natural feature of the region which, it seems, should have impressed Mrs. Behn on her journey to a distant Indian village. Travel on the Surinam, soon after passing Sara Creek, about forty miles above Marshall's, becomes very difficult, if not impossible, owing to the falls, of which there are at least twenty-eight.[1] Yet though Mrs. Behn traveled by boat eight days to reach the village, she never mentions a waterfall.

It is noteworthy that some of the true characteristics of the country might have been serviceably employed by Mrs. Behn. Since Oroonoko was the leader in the expedition to the Indian village, the obstacles that falls would place in his way should have presented his admirer good opportunities for the further display of his intelligence and strength. She might likewise have intensified our sympathy for some of his hardships by making us realize the humid heat in which they were endured. And the hopelessness of Oroonoko's insurrection would have appeared more poignantly if she had shown him rising, not in a sparsely settled district, but against a well-established community and a respectable military force. Why should an author who had dwelt face to face with these circumstances, ignore and even contradict them?

But had the author of *Oroonoko* really been in Surinam? *The Life and Memoirs of Mrs. Behn*, her earliest biography of any length, says that she had been there; and no one has hitherto questioned the statement. How any one can read the *Life and Memoirs*, including its fantastic account of her meeting a marble platform floating on the English Channel, and place confidence in it, is to me incomprehensible; but this is not the place to expose its general worthlessness. What concerns us particularly is that it draws its account of Mrs. Behn's life from passages in her stories; and that its assertion of her visit to Surinam is not independent testimony but a repetition of the autobiographical statements in *Oroonoko* itself.[2] Of those statements, one—that her father was to have been "Lieutenant General of six-and-thirty islands, besides the continent of Surinam"—has been shown unreliable, Mr. Gosse having discovered that her father was a barber.[3] I may add that no hint of any appointment to replace Byam appears in the colonial papers of the period. Though this falsehood has been generally recognized, its full bearing on *Oroonoko* has apparently been overlooked; for it has not shaken belief in Mrs. Behn's journey. Yet if Mrs. Behn's father was not sent to Surinam, the only reason she gives for being there disappears. Furthermore, if she was not the daughter of the future governor, why was she assigned "the best house in the country"? (We recall that it stood on that remarkable "vast rock of white marble.") Those excursions which she and her friends

[1] Hartsinck, II, 574.

[2] *The Life and Memoirs of Mrs. Behn*, in her *Works*, London, 1871, V, 2; *Oroonoko*, p. 50.

[3] *Dictionary of National Biography*, art. "Aphra Behn."

enjoyed in the royal slave's company, and which constitute so large a portion of the narrative, depended largely upon the confidence placed in her promises by Oroonoko, whom, she says, she "had assured of liberty as soon as the governor arrived";[1] and that confidence, in turn, depended upon her being related to the great. It seems as if, when the fundamental allegation is revealed false, the very structure of her "history" crumbles; and as if such a downright statement as Professor Canby's "the royal slave she unquestionably knew, and knew well"[2] were made without scrutinizing the evidence.

If we nevertheless find it difficult to believe that Mrs. Behn was not in Surinam, let us tentatively surmise that she was in some way connected with a colonist; and that in *Oroonoko* she pretended to a more distinguished relationship in order, perhaps, to place herself more plausibly in the center of the events narrated. But that is, of course, an assumption. What we know is that at least one important statement of hers is a falsehood. Her unsupported word that she was in Surinam is therefore untrustworthy unless in our further examination of *Oroonoko* it shall appear that she reports veraciously facts which only an eye-witness could have observed.

Mrs. Behn speaks of a considerable number of the animals of Surinam. The buffalo and deer she merely mentions; but she gives correct though brief descriptions of the armadillo, the "cusharee," the marmoset, and some strange flies.[3] Of the "tigers," that is, jaguars, which Oroonoko delights to hunt, her accounts are exaggerated; one of them "was about the height of a heifer"[4] — hardly a realistic description. Oroonoko's adventure with a "numb eel" is sensational. He is angling on the shore, when the eel takes his hook and sends its electric current through the line and rod to his hand. He bravely grasps the rod harder, faints from the shock, falls into the water, and is carried a league down the river. As he floats past, some Indians seize his body, and from it receive a strong shock. "By that they knew the rod was in his hand; which with a paddle they struck away, and snatched it into the boat, eel and all."[5] She adds that the eel was "a quarter of an ell about," — some eleven inches. The size of the eel, the duration of its electric charge, and above all the circumstance that it does not shock by direct contact but sends its current through the fish line, are more than questionable. Yet the truth remains that with the exception of the cayman, the most interesting animals of Surinam are in a manner known to the author. We should revive our faith in her credibility, were personal observation the only means by which she could have learned the fauna of Surinam.

In 1667, George Warren, who had lived three years in that colony, published a little pamphlet, now rare, entitled *An Impartial Description of Surinam*. Herein its fauna is likewise described, and here too the cayman is the only

[1] *Oroonoko*, pp. 46–47. [2] Canby, p. 163. [3] *Oroonoko*, pp. 2, 5.
[4] Ibid., p. 53. [5] Ibid., pp. 55–56.

important animal omitted. With the single exception of the marmoset,[1] every animal that Mrs. Behn describes is described by Warren. For example, the latter says of the armadilloes:

> They are short legged, have three claws upon their feet, are headed like a hog, have no teeth and but very little mouths; they are defended all over, save the head and belly, with an armor as it were plated, scarce penetrable by a lance, unless it happen in a joint. They burrow in the ground, and had they not quite so strong a smell of musk, would be no contemptible meat.[2]

Compare Mrs. Behn:

> The very meat we eat, when set on the table, if it be native, I mean of the country, perfumes the whole room; especially a little beast called an armadillo, a thing which I can liken to nothing so well as a rhinoceros. It is all in white armor, so jointed that it moves as well in it as if it had nothing on.[3]

The only animals in connection with which Mrs. Behn relates any incidents are the "tiger" and the electric eel; the same is true of Warren. The latter's story about the eel is worth comparing with the above adventure of Oroonoko:

> The torpedo or numb eel, which, being alive, and touching any other living creature, strikes such a deadness into all the parts as for a while renders them wholly useless and insensible, which, is believed, has occasioned the drowning of several persons who have been unhappily so taken as they were swimming in the river. It produces the like effect if but touched with the end of a long pole, or one man immediately laying hold of another so benumbed. The truth of this was experienced, one of them being taken and thrown upon the bank, where a dog spying it stir, catches it in his mouth, and presently falls down, which the master observing, and going to pull him off, becomes motionless himself; another standing by, and endeavoring to remove him, follows the same fortune; the eel getting loose, they return quickly to themselves.[4]

Much of the vividness of the background of *Oroonoko* arises from the specific descriptions of the exotic and indigenous flora. In this respect, too, the particulars that are true are to be found in Warren.[5] When differences appear, they show Mrs. Behn not independently observing but inaccurately amplifying, as in the passage which for its *anschaulichkeit* is quoted entire by Professor Siegel, and which describes a lovely grove of orange and lemon trees crowning the "rock of white marble."[6] "Vast trees" they are indeed, "as big as English oaks"! The orchids of the forest, and the great palms that border the river banks, though conspicuous, are omitted by Warren — and by Mrs. Behn. Her landscape is uniformly flowery; we read of "the trees appearing all like nosegays," and that "the opposite bank was adorned with such vast quantities of different flowers eternally blowing, and every day

[1] These appear to have been taken to Europe as pets. See *Purchas His Pilgrimes*, XVI, 313, 348, 379, 395.

[2] Warren, George, *An Impartial Description of Surinam*, London, 1667, p. 11.

[3] *Oroonoko*, p. 51. [4] Warren, p. 2. [5] Cf. *Oroonoko*, p. 51, with Warren, pp. 5, 15–16.

[6] Siegel, pp. 88–89; *Oroonoko*, p. 52.

and hour new."[1] In this riot of color we see what has been called "the old tropical fallacy," which was exploded by A. R. Wallace in his *Tropical Nature*. The early European travelers reported especially the striking, gorgeous plants; and, though these are usually scattered amid great masses of green, gave the impression that everywhere the flowers grew in solid banks of bright color. "There is never there," says E. F. Im Thurn, "a growing carpet of flowers such as is made in England by primroses and anemones."[2] Here again Mrs. Behn's eye does not seem to have been upon the object.

It may be urged that accuracy in describing nature is hardly to be expected, even from a "realist," in Mrs. Behn's time, when the proper study of mankind was man. Do we find her powers of observation more reliable when directed on Oroonoko and his fellow slaves? That some important characteristics of the hero and the heroine are idealized, every one grants; but the description of slave life is in general assumed to be copied from grim reality. In Oroonoko's savage delight in slaughter, says Professor Siegel, Mrs. Behn followed truth; "the brutal murder of Imoinda, and the stoical endurance of torture," adds Miss Morgan, "is the conduct of a savage; and in those passages Mrs. Behn was depending upon her observations."[3] But turn to Warren's short chapter on the negroes, who, he notes,

> are most brought out of Guiny in Africa to those parts, where they are sold like dogs, and no better esteemed but for their work sake, which they perform all the week with the severest usages for the slightest fault, till Saturday afternoon, when they are allowed to dress their own gardens. . . . Their lodging is a hard board, and their black skins their covering. These wretched miseries not seldom drive them to desperate attempts for the recovery of their liberty, endeavoring to escape, and if like to be retaken sometimes lay violent hands upon themselves. Or, if the hope of pardon bring them again alive into their masters' power, they'll manifest their fortitude, or rather obstinacy, in suffering the most exquisite tortures can be inflicted upon them, for a terror and example to others without shrinking. . . . Many of them over fondly woo their deaths, not otherwise hoping to be freed from that indeed unequalled slavery.[4]

Is it not significant that this little outline emphasizes the very traits that constitute the realistic elements on the larger canvas of Mrs. Behn?

Needless to say, she amplifies and adds; but, as we have already seen in the case of Oroonoko's horrible wounds, the elaborations do not of themselves inspire confidence. What a singularly lax plantation it is that permits the tasks of Imoinda to be daily done for her by "some sighing lover"![5] "Cæsar," we are told, was the plantation name of the negro prince; his native name was Oroonoko.[6] Of course "Oroonoko" is not African; but "Orinoco" is Indian for "coiled serpent," and was suitably applied to the winding river whose name

[1] *Oroonoko*, pp. 51–52. [2] Im Thurn, E. F., *Among the Indians of Guiana*, 1883, pp. 87–91.
[3] Siegel, p. 346; Morgan, Charlotte E., *The Rise of the Novel of Manners*, New York, 1911, p. 81. [4] Warren, pp. 19–20. [5] *Oroonoko*, p. 44.
[6] Ibid., p. 41.— Warren, p. 23, spells Orinoco "Oronoque."

Raleigh made famous. That such an obvious slip has not aroused remark seems singular, until we find the general inattention to such matters manifested in an even more fantastic confusion, namely in the suggestion that Oroonoko's home, Coramantien, may be the Coramandel Coast[1] (in East India!). Coramantien was a district of Guinea. It was well known to the English, who, about 1662, had a "castle" there, which was an important supply station for the African Company that monopolized the slave traffic of the British West Indies.[2] Though Mrs. Behn is therefore correct enough in assigning her royal slave to that country, she seems to ignore some particulars concerning it. The English ship which bore Oroonoko from Coramantien must, according to Mrs. Behn's narrative, have arrived in Surinam in May, 1665, at the very earliest.[3] But early in 1665 Coramantien was captured by the Dutch, under the famous De Ruyter, who thence sailed to attack Barbadoes.[4] It appears improbable that English slavers ventured from Coramantien to Surinam from the close of 1664 until the end of the Dutch war in 1667.

We may also question the description which Mrs. Behn gives of the Coramantien negro. Oroonoko, she says, was "carved with a little flower or bird at the sides of the temples," and Imoinda was "carved" "all over her body," "resembling our ancient Picts that are figured in the chronicles" (!). As a matter of fact, many tribes of negroes were thus "carved"; but those from Coramantien happened to be exceptional in this respect, and were noted for their "fine, smooth, black skin."[5] In short, the more one learns about Coramantien, the less true seem those strokes in her picture of negro life that are peculiarly her own.

About the Indians of Surinam, Mrs. Behn writes in tones of admiration, and with a vividness that has been especially commended.[6] The natives of that region were the Caribs, between whom and the English no serious trouble, such as is assumed in a part of *Oroonoko*, appears actually to have taken place in Surinam during the time in question.[7] They were more numerous than Mrs. Behn intimates, and their habitations were less remote.[8] They were not so handsome as she describes them, nor did they woo in so languishing a manner.[9] She recounts that her companions aroused their wonder by playing the flute, but the natives were quite familiar with that instrument.[10] They were so honorable, she declares, that they could not conceive of a "liar";

[1] Canby, p. 163.

[2] *State Papers*, pp. 113, 135, 146, 174, 194; C. P. Lucas, *Historical Geography of the British Colonies*, Oxford, 1905, II, 44, 64. [3] See above, p. 422. [4] *State Papers*, pp. 294–295.

[5] Hartsinck, II, 921-922; H. G. Dalton, *History of British Guiana*, London, 1855, I, 163.

[6] Siegel, p. 357 n. 1. [7] *State Papers*, p. 598; Warren, p. 26.

[8] Warren, p. 23; Rodway, *Guiana*, p. 44.

[9] *Oroonoko*, p. 3; Im Thurn, pp. 188, 221; John Davies, *History of the Caribby Islands*, London, 1666, pp. 270, 334. [10] *Oroonoko*, p. 59; Im Thurn, p. 309; Davies, p. 307.

but the Jesuit missionary Pellepart, who in 1655 compiled a little dictionary of their language, gives no less than five Carib synonyms for "menteur." [1]

What Mrs. Behn tells us about Indian dress, adornments, weapons, and customs is often correct; but in no instance does she present a true fact that is not to be found in Warren's chapter on the Indians. Her omissions agree with his. Both authors, in discussing the "peaiman," omit the long fasts and solitary wanderings that were so interesting a part of the medicine man's training.[2] Both, in describing the appearance of the Caribs, omit the leg band which, tied above the ankle and below the knee of female infants and never thence removed, caused a gross distortion of the calf, which was most conspicuous.[3]

As we have seen to be the case in other parts of the story, circumstances accurately stated by Warren are by Mrs. Behn so elaborated as to become improbable or false. Warren deplores that the Indian girls are unacquainted with "that innocent and warm delight of kissing; but conversing so frequently with Christians, and being naturally docile and ingenious, we have reason to believe they will in time be taught it."[4] Instead of this speculative pleasantry, we have in Mrs. Behn an episode showing that it was her party that taught the Indians how to kiss. In her lively account of the occasion, we miss, however, an explanation of how the practice could have been so enjoyable to the Caribs, whose lips are pierced with holes, in which are inserted thorns or pins.[5] In describing the hospitality of the Indians, Mrs. Behn again provides some information like that in Warren; but with regard to the food and drink, the service, the "napery," etc., makes so many errors of omission and commission that they cannot be enumerated here.[6]

Her regular method may be illustrated by her transmutation of the following true statement by Warren concerning Indian captains,

> whose courage they first prove, by sharply whipping them with rods, which if they endure bravely without crying, or any considerable motion, they are acknowledged gallant fellows and honored by the less hardy.[7]

[1] *Oroonoko*, p. 4; Pierre Pellepart, *Introduction à la langue des Galibis*, Paris, 1655, p. 25.

I have compared the Indian words given by Mrs. Behn (*Oroonoko*, p. 58) with old word-lists and with modern, both Carib and Arowak, and believe them not authentic; but in the confusion of Indian tongues, I feel it unsafe to declare them certainly fraudulent. Cf. *The Voyage of Robert Dudley to the West Indies*, ed. G. F. Warner, London, 1899, pp. 65, 78–79; Davies's Caribbean vocabulary in his *History of the Caribby Islands*, 1666, pp. 353 ff.; D. G. Brinton, *The Arawack Language of Guiana*, 1870; J. Crevaux, P. Sagot, L. Adam, *Grammaires et Vocabulaires roucouyenne, arrouague, piapoco et d'autres langues*, Paris, 1882.

[2] *Oroonoko*, p. 59; Warren, pp. 26–27; Im Thurn, p. 334.

[3] Im Thurn, p. 192.

[4] Warren, pp. 23–24.

[5] *Oroonoko*, p. 60; Im Thurn, p. 193.

[6] *Oroonoko*, pp. 58–59; Davies, chap. xviii ("Of the Entertainment which the Caribbians make those who come to visit them"); Im Thurn, chaps. xiii and xv ("Food" and "Feasts").

[7] Warren, pp. 24–25; Davies, pp. 314, 315.

Mrs. Behn, on the other hand, tells us that Oroonoko marvelled at the frightful scars of the chiefs, who explained that competitors for a captaincy mutilated themselves in the following manner:

> Being brought before the old judges, now past labor, they are asked what they dare do to show they are worthy to lead an army. When he who is first asked, making no reply, cuts off his nose, and throws it contemptibly on the ground; and the other does something to himself that he thinks surpasses him, and perhaps deprives himself of lips and an eye. So they slash on till one gives out, and many have died in this debate, —. . . a sort of courage too brutal to be applauded by our black hero.[1]

Yet despite such monstrous perversions, Mrs. Behn, according to some, presents Indian life "most anthropologically"!

It was not a vivid imagination alone that furnished Mrs. Behn with her enlargements upon Warren. In her idealization of the moral character of the savages (the "impartial" Warren found them "cowardly and treacherous"), she shows the influence of a sentimental tradition in the European literature of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, which likewise manifests itself in the noble Indians of the heroic drama.[2] Some details in the appearance of Mrs. Behn's Indians are also traditional. She clothes them in "short habits" and "glorious wreaths" of feathers. "I had a set of these presented to me," she says, "and I gave them to the King's Theatre; it was the dress of the Indian Queen, infinitely admired by persons of quality, and was inimitable."[3] To think of Nell Gwynn in the true costume of a Carib belle is indeed ludicrous. Besides the apron, the principal Carib adornments were strings of beads or shells; the men might, on great occasions, wear some feathers on their heads and shoulders. In Surinam anything like the elaborate feather costume of Mrs. Behn's fancy was unknown.[4] But the first aborigines whom the Europeans learned about were the incomparably superior natives of Mexico, whose gorgeous featherwork garments were among the noble presents sent by Montezuma to Cortez, and by Cortez to the king of Spain. "No one of the American fabrics excited such admiration," says Prescott, who cites many passages of admiring description of them.[5] For literary purposes they thenceforth became the conventional garments of all Indians. Probably the quivers mentioned by Mrs. Behn are derived from the same tradition; the Carib arrows were very long, and their quivers were small cases to hold only the poisoned points.[6]

From an English point of view perhaps the most interesting tradition that may be recognized in *Oroonoko* appears in the episode of the gold-bearing savages. In his preface, Warren cautiously remarks: "The Indians will tell

[1] *Oroonoko*, pp. 60–61.

[2] Charlotte E. Morgan, *The Novel of Manners*, pp. 81–82; Gilbert Chinard, *L'Exotisme américain*, 1911.

[3] *Oroonoko*, p. 2.

[4] Im Thurn, p. 199.

[5] W. H. Prescott, *Conquest of Mexico*, Philadelphia, 1873, I, 147, 299, 356, 430; II, 68, 129.

[6] *Oroonoko*, p. 60; Im Thurn, p. 243; *Purchas His Pilgrimes*, XVI, 415.

you of mighty princes upwards, and golden cities, how true I know not." The colonists of 1665 were not seeking gold: they were raising sugar. But Oroonoko and Mrs. Behn meet "Indians of strange aspects," who come from the mountains, speak an unknown tongue, and carry bags of gold-dust, "which, as well as they could give us to understand, came streaming in little small channels down the high mountains, when the rains fell." These are, I think, the echoes of the hopeful words that the brave Elizabethans sent home across the seas, when they were seeking El Dorado, which lay ever "on the other side of those great hills," where ran "streams of gold about the breadth of a goosequill." [1]

If these observations are approved, we must at last abandon the interesting assumption that it was personal acquaintance with an unfortunate slave, and actual observation of Surinam, that furnished Mrs. Behn with the materials for *Oroonoko*. The Dutch wars, which drew attention to that colony, provided her with the few correct touches in the historical background of the picture. For the rest, whatever was real in the local color was given her by Warren's description of the natural environment, the slaves, and the Indians. In thus employing a true account, she was using the method of Defoe and his predecessors, whose fiction is rooted in the literature of fact. Those writers, however, when rearranging and elaborating journalistic reports, managed to carry their Captain Singletons from Mozambique to Guinea without seriously blundering into the unreal; for they made it their controlling aim not to deviate from the probable. No such bounds confined the romantic, sensational, and hero-worshipping Mrs. Behn. Whatever in Warren's account might serve to make the scene of Oroonoko's actions interesting, or might be utilized in an episode displaying his noble qualities, was thus employed; but whatever did not please her fancy, she at will suppressed or modified. She exalted the loveliness of the climate and landscape of Surinam, the marvels of its flora and fauna, and the innocence of its inhabitants. She enhanced its charm with touches taken from the picturesque traditions of Cortez and of Raleigh. What she says of Miranda in *The Fair Jilt* seems applicable to herself: "She had a great deal of wit, read much, and retained all that served her purpose." If she ever sincerely intended to write anything like a true story, she abandoned that intention as soon as she had stated it, and gave her fancy free rein. The second-hand materials that form the realistic foundation of *Oroonoko* are so inconspicuous in comparison with the romantic superstructure that to emphasize their presence is to obscure the purpose and character of her art.

[1] *Oroonoko*, p. 61; *Purchas His Pilgrimes*, XVI, 306, 340, 346, 386, 387, 396, 407, 409. Traces of the tradition in Hall, Donne, and Milton are mentioned in *Voyages of the Elizabethan Seamen to America*, ed. E. J. Payne, Second Series, 2d ed., Oxford, 1900, p. xlvii.